Hiroshima mon amour

Joanna Di Mattia September 2013 CTEQ Annotations on Film Issue 70

> *"You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing."*
> – *He* (Eiji Okada) in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)

The importance of bearing witness preoccupied Alain Resnais (1922-2014) in the years prior to directing his first feature length film. *Hiroshima mon amour*, the result of that concern, remains one of cinema's most profound meditations on the horror of war, suffering and forgetting.

Preceding his entry into fiction filmmaking Resnais had directed over 20 short documentaries, most extraordinary among them *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955), a document of the legacy of the death camps Auschwitz and Majdanek. *Hiroshima mon amour* grew from a commission to make a documentary short about the atomic bomb, but Resnais found this an impossible task – how can one make a documentary about Hiroshima, the impossibility of speaking the unspeakable, imagining the unimaginable? Can we ever really *see* what happened in Hiroshima? Is seeing understanding? Can we only understand another's suffering if we experience it ourselves? These are some of the questions that shaped Resnais' narrative. The fictional love story he uses to frame *Hiroshima mon amour* enabled Resnais to present a more universal inquiry into the nature of suffering and remembrance.

A film of tremendous beauty and gravity, the experience of *Hiroshima mon amour* lasts long after the screen fades to black. Far less playful than many of the films that would follow it and announce the arrival of the *nouvelle vague*, including Jean Luc-Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960) and François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959) and *Jules et Jim* (1962), the strength of its impact lies primarily in the affecting juxtaposition of horrific imagery with rhythmic, poetic dialogue (written by Marguerite Duras). Its striking score, penned by Georges Delerue and Giovanni Fusco, ties these haunting elements together.

Hiroshima mon amour is a film of bold contrasts. Its much-lauded opening scene stands as a testament to Hiroshima, the city, rebuilt after the cataclysm of the war, but unable to escape its past. But it's also the story of two lovers who face similarly inescapable histories, and it's into their story that Resnais immediately immerses us. Resnais presents a cropped image, a close-up of two bodies, naked and locked in an embrace. Dust showers down, covering them. It's an image of doom, both beautiful and shocking, intended to draw us back in time, to remind us of the countless bodies like these, buried in the rubble of war, covered in the deadly atomic dust that rained over Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) at the close of World War II. And then the scene dissolves into the present. Two lovers, naked and locked in embrace, dust replaced now by less ominous beads of sweat.

From here, Resnais cuts to images at the hospital in Hiroshima and at the museum. The woman, a French actress in Hiroshima making a film "about peace", known only in the credits as *She* (Emmanuelle Riva), recounts in voiceover what she saw there. *She* repeats, "I saw them...", in an attempt to memorialise and make real her experience because she knows what it is to forget. Resnais presents a series of horrific images – loose human skin and hair, twisted metal, photos and moving images of scorched bodies, malformed children – "since there is

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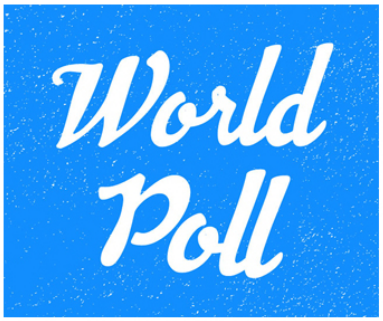

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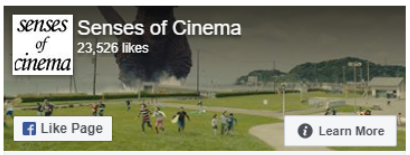

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and hair, twisted metal, photos and moving images of scorched bodies, malformed children – "since there is nothing else". But her Japanese lover, an architect, known only as *He* interrupts her narration, repeating the film's most powerful, orienting line: "You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing."

In *Hiroshima mon amour* suffering is both public and private, remembrance both collective and personal. But what can *She* really know? Later, *She* tells *He* the tale of her passionate love for a German soldier during the war in her home-town, Nevers – their discovery, his murder, her crippling grief and her humiliation at the hands of the townsfolk. *She* fears forgetting him. Telling their story is a way to keep him alive, while she is also aware that every step she takes into the future is a step further from her past. *He* tells her, encapsulating the whole film: "I shall remember you as love itself forgotten. I know now that I shall think of this story as of the horror of forgetting." But *She* feels that in telling her story she has already forgotten the German man. The telling, the remembering, as essential as they are, feels like a betrayal.

Memories fade, people forget, people are forgotten. There is a melancholy inevitability to this. But to embrace the future, perhaps the past must be forsaken. Resnais, by the film's moving finale, has not definitively resolved this dilemma and yet we are left with a feeling, as Eric Rohmer described it in a roundtable discussion on the film in 1959 with other *Cahiers du cinéma* editors, of the "anguish of the future".

Resnais presents time in a circular fashion – past, present and future looping into each other. He achieves this through repeated dialogue and a wholly innovative film aesthetic. *Hiroshima mon amour*, debuting at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival alongside Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups*, was immediately marked as a "different" kind of film, heralding a new, exciting cinematic language.

Using multiple flashbacks, ellipses and voiceover narration, Resnais presented a challenge to classical narrative cinema forms. Here, as in much of the New Wave that he was both a part of and apart from (he was more closely aligned with the "Left Bank" group early in his career), was a cinema of images and ideas, evolving with little reverence for the conventions of plot and story development that cinema audiences had grown comfortable with. In *Hiroshima mon amour* linear construction is abandoned; storytelling is circular and unresolved.

For all its weighty ideas, *Hiroshima mon amour* is also a deeply intimate film. The repetition of dialogue affects this familiarity, as does the framing of shots at angles and distances that trap us within the frame. But it is not claustrophobic so much as immersive and dreamlike and images gain a strangely musical, hypnotic quality. Despite this, it always feels like a film that exists in the real world; not quite neo-realist but certainly revealing something of its conceptual origins as a documentary.

The film's final lines suggest not only a story with no end but also a new beginning. "Hi-ro-shi-ma. That's your name," *She* tells him. And *He* replies, "It's my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers in France." Each body forever located in the suffering of the place from which they come; enabling the other to never forget.

If it was and remains impossible to speak of what happened in Hiroshima it is less difficult to imagine something of the impact of what happened through our own experiences of loss, grief and forgetting. And this, ultimately, is what we take with us when we view Resnais' film – a feeling of the weight of time and how we go on living, sometimes, against insurmountable odds. *Hiroshima mon amour* is one of the most important films of the 20th century and certainly one of its cinematic milestones, but also one of its most emotionally devastating.

Hiroshima mon amour (1959 France/Japan 90mins)

Prod Co: Argos Films/Como Films/Daiei/Pathé Entertainment **Prod:** Anatole Dauman, Samy Halfon **Dir:** Alain Resnais **Scr:** Marguerite Duras **Phot:** Sacha Vierny, Michio Takahashi **Ed:** Henri Colpi, Jasmine Chasney, Anne Sarraute **Prod Des:** Esaka, Mayo, Petri **Mus:** Georges Delerue, Giovanni Fusco

Cast: Emmanuelle Riva, Eiji Okada, Stella Dassas, Pierre Barbaud, Bernard Fresson

Hiroshima Mon amour

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Joanna Di Mattia is a writer and film critic. She has a PhD in Women's Studies from Monash University where her research examined anxiety about masculinity in contemporary American cinema. She contributes to a number of publications and her writing reflects her interest in the aesthetics of desire, sexuality, and the pleasure of looking.

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